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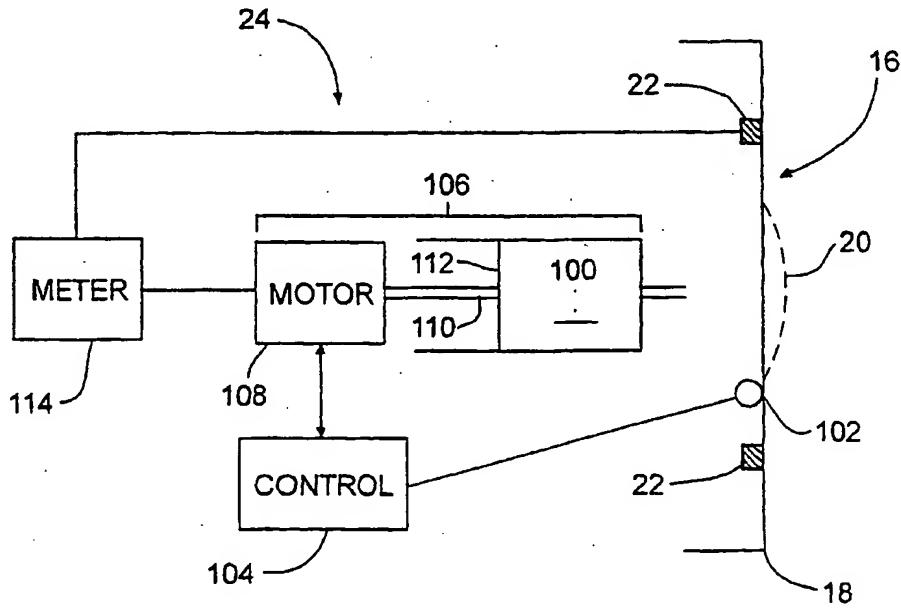
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(57) Abstract: A method for controlling the supply of liquid to an aerosol generator (16) comprises operating a liquid supply system (24) to supply a liquid to a vibratable aperture plate (20) of an aerosol generator (16) which senses an amount of liquid adhering to the vibratable aperture plate (16), and controls operation of the liquid supply system (24) to adjust the amount of liquid adhering to the vibratable aperture plate (16).

PATENT APPLICATION
SYSTEMS AND METHODS FOR CONTROLLING FLUID FEED TO AN
AEROSOL GENERATOR

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SYSTEMS AND METHODS FOR CONTROLLING FLUID FEED TO AN AEROSOL GENERATOR

CROSS-REFERENCES TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

5 This application is a continuation-in-part application of U.S. patent application Serial No. 09/318,552, filed May 27, 1999, which is a continuation application of U.S. patent application Serial No. 08/417,311, filed April 5, 1995 (now U.S. Patent No. 5,938,117), which is a continuation-in-part application of U.S. patent application Serial No. 08/163,850 filed on December 7, 1993, which is a continuation-in-part of U.S. patent application Serial 10 No. 07/726,777 filed on July 8, 1991 (now abandoned), which is a continuation-in-part of U.S. patent application Serial No. 07/691,584 filed on April 24, 1991, now U.S. Patent No. 5,164,740. The complete disclosures of all these references are herein incorporated by reference.

15 BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to improved aerosolizing devices, particularly but not exclusively for atomizing liquid medicaments to be inhaled, and to a method of constructing such devices.

20 A wide variety of procedures have been proposed to deliver a drug to a patient. Of particular interest to the present invention are drug delivery procedures where the drug is a liquid and is dispensed in the form of fine liquid droplets for inhalation by a patient. A variety of devices have been proposed for forming the dispersion, including air jet nebulizers, ultrasonic nebulizers and metered dose inhalers (MDIs). Air jet nebulizers usually utilize a high pressure air compressor and a baffle system that separates the large 25 particles from the spray. Ultrasonic nebulizers generate ultrasonic waves with an oscillating piezoelectric crystal to produce liquid droplets. Another type of ultrasonic nebulizer is described in US Patent Nos. 5,261,601 and 4,533,082. Typical MDIs usually employ a gas propellant, such as a CFC, which carries the therapeutic substance and is sprayed into the mouth of the patient.

The present applicant has also proposed a variety of aerosolization devices for atomizing liquid solutions. For example, one exemplary atomization apparatus is described in US Patent No. 5,164,740, the complete disclosure of which is herein incorporated by reference. The atomization apparatus comprises an ultrasonic transducer and an aperture plate attached to the transducer. The aperture plate includes tapered apertures which are employed to produce small liquid droplets. The transducer vibrates the plate at relatively high frequencies so that when the liquid is placed in contact with the rear surface of the aperture plate and the plate is vibrated, liquid droplets will be ejected through the apertures. The apparatus described in US 5,164,740 has been instrumental in producing small liquid droplets without the need for placing a fluidic chamber in contact with the aperture plate. Instead, small volumes of liquid are delivered to the rear surface of the aperture plate and held in place by surface tension forces.

Modified atomization apparatus are described in U.S. Patent Nos. 5,586,550 and 5,758,637, the complete disclosures of which are herein incorporated by reference. The two references describe a liquid droplet generator which is particularly useful in producing a high flow of droplets in a narrow size distribution. As described in U.S. 5,586,550, the use of a dome shaped aperture plate is advantageous in allowing more of the apertures to eject liquid droplets.

One requirement of such aerosolization devices is the need to supply liquid to the aperture plate. In some applications, such as when delivering aerosolized medicaments to the lungs, it may be desirable to regulate the supply of the liquid to the aperture plate so that proper pulmonary delivery of the drug may occur. For example, if too much liquid is supplied, the aerosol generator may be unable to aerosolize fully all of the delivered liquid. On the other hand, if too little liquid is supplied, the user may not receive a sufficient dosage. Further, a metering process may be needed to ensure that a unit dosage amount of the liquid is delivered to the aerosol generator. This may be challenging if the user requires several inhalations in order to inhale the unit dose amount.

The present invention is related to liquid feed systems and methods for delivering liquids to the aerosol generator to facilitate aerosolization of the liquid.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The invention provides exemplary aerosolization devices and methods for aerosolizing liquids. In one embodiment, an aerosolization device comprises a liquid supply system that is adapted to hold a supply of liquid, and an aerosol generator that is configured 5 to aerosolize liquid supplied from the liquid supply system. In one aspect, the aerosol generator may comprise a plate having a plurality of apertures and a vibratable element disposed to vibrate the plate. The aerosolization device further comprises a sensor configured to sense an amount of unaerosolized liquid supplied to the aerosol generator, and a controller to control operation of the liquid supply system based on information received from the 10 sensor. In this way, during aerosolization the amount of unaerosolized liquid supplied to the aerosol generator remains within a certain range. In this manner, the device is configured to prevent either too much or too little liquid from being supplied to the aerosol generator at any one time.

In one aspect, the sensor comprises a strain gauge coupled to the aerosol 15 generator for detecting variations in strain caused by varying amounts of unaerosolized liquid adhering to the aerosol generator. The strain gauge may comprise a piezoelectric element coupled to the aerosol generator such that variations in an electrical characteristic (e.g. impedance) are representative of unaerosolized liquid adhering to the aerosol generator. The piezoelectric element may also act as a transducer disposed to vibrate an aperture plate in the 20 aerosol generator.

In another aspect, the sensor may comprise an optical sensor. The optical sensor may be configured to sense the presence or absence of unaerosolized liquid at a certain location on the aerosol generator. The certain location may be spaced from where liquid is supplied to the aerosol generator.

25 In yet another aspect, the sensor may be a conductivity sensor that is configured to sense electrical conductivity between at least two points across a surface of the aerosol generator on which unaerosolized liquid may adhere. At least one of the points may be spaced from where liquid is supplied to the aerosol generator. Further, at least one of the points may be closer to where liquid is supplied to the aerosol generator than another one of 30 the points. In this way, sensing electrical conductivity may give an indication of unaerosolized liquid distribution across the aerosol generator.

In one particular embodiment, the amount of unaerosolized liquid on the aerosol generator remains within the range from about 0 to about 20 microliters, and more preferably from about 2 microliters to about 20 microliters.

5 The device may further comprise a housing having a mouthpiece, with the aerosol generator disposed in the housing for delivery of aerosolized liquid through the mouthpiece. In this way, a drug may be aerosolized and ready for pulmonary delivery upon patient inhalation.

10 In another particular aspect, the liquid supply system may comprise a dispenser for dispensing a certain amount of liquid upon receipt of an appropriate signal from the controller. In this way, a predetermined amount of liquid may be chosen to ensure the aerosol generator is not overloaded at any one time. The device may further comprise a meter for limiting the number of times the dispenser is activated during operation of the aerosol generator. In this way, the total liquid delivered by the aerosol generator in any one period of operation may be accurately controlled, thereby limiting the risk of delivering 15 below or above a recommended dose.

20 In yet another particular embodiment, the device may further comprise a heater for heating unaerosolized liquid supplied to the aerosol generator. The heater may be adapted to heat the aerosol generator to vaporize or burn off residual unaerosolized liquid after aerosol generator cessation. In this way, residual unaerosolized liquid may be removed to prevent interference with a subsequent aerosolization event. The heater may comprise an electrical resistance heater and an electrical power supply (e.g. battery) for energizing resistance heating.

25 In another embodiment of the invention, a method for aerosolizing a liquid utilizes an aerosol generator that is operable to aerosolize a liquid. According to the method, a liquid is supplied to the aerosol generator from a liquid supply system at an initial flow rate. During aerosolization, the amount of supplied liquid remaining unaerosolized is sensed and the rate of liquid supply regulated based upon the sensed amount. The rate of liquid supply may be decreased if the sensed amount exceeds a certain value, and the rate of liquid supply may be increased if the sensed amount falls below a critical level. In this way, it is possible 30 to prevent or to reduce the extent of supplying too much or too little liquid being supplied to the aerosol generator at any one time.

In one aspect, the method further comprises providing a heater for heating unaerosolized liquid supplied to the aerosol generator. By sensing whether any of the supplied liquid remains unaerosolized after cessation of the liquid supply, the heater may be operated to vaporize or burn-off such supplied liquid remaining on the aerosol generator.

5 In yet another embodiment of the invention, an aerosolization device comprises a liquid supply system that is adapted to hold a supply of liquid, and an aerosol generator comprising a plate having a plurality of apertures and an electric transducer disposed to vibrate the plate when energized. A sensor is configured to sense an electrical characteristic of the electrical transducer that is dependent upon an amount of unaerosolized
10 liquid adhering to the plate. A controller is provided to regulate operation of the liquid supply in order to maintain the amount of unaerosolized liquid adhering to the plate within a certain range during aerosolization.

In a still further embodiment, a method is provided for controlling the supply of a liquid to an aerosol generator. According to the method, a liquid supply system is
15 operated to supply a liquid to a vibratable aperture plate of an aerosol generator. An amount of liquid adhering to the vibratable plate is sensed and is used to control the amount of liquid supplied to the plate. By controlling operation of the liquid supply system, the amount of liquid adhering to the vibratable aperture plate may be regulated.

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Figure 1 is a cross-sectional schematic diagram of an aerosolization device according to the invention.

Figure 2 is a schematic diagram showing an alternative aerosolization device and liquid supply system embodying the present invention.

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Figure 3 is a schematic diagram of one embodiment of a fluid sensor according to the invention.

Figure 4 is a schematic diagram of one embodiment of a liquid supply system according to the invention.

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Figure 5 is a schematic diagram showing a heater for an aerosol generator according to the invention.

Figure 6 is a flow chart illustrating one method of controlling the supply of liquid to an aerosol generator.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SPECIFIC EMBODIMENTS

The invention provides exemplary aerosolization devices and methods for controlling the supply of a liquid to an aerosol generator. The invention is applicable to 5 essentially any aerosolizer where liquid delivered to the aerosolizer may accumulate leading to variation in device performance. Merely by way of example, the invention may be used with atomizers such as those described in U.S. Patent Nos. 5,140,740, 5,938,117, 5,586,550, and 6,014,970, incorporated herein by reference. However, it will be appreciated that the invention is not intended to be limited only to these specific atomizers.

10 Aerosolization devices embodying the present invention conveniently sense the amount of unaerosolized liquid which has accumulated at the aerosol generator. This information is used to modify the rate of supply of liquid to the aerosol generator to maintain the amount of liquid adhering to the aerosol generator within certain limits. In this way, the aerosol generator is neither oversupplied nor under supplied with liquid, and is able to 15 operate efficiently and effectively.

20 The sensor may take a variety of forms. For example, the sensor may be a piezoelectric device for sensing strains induced on the aerosol generator by liquid loads. Alternatively, the sensor may be an optical sensor, a conductivity sensor, or the like for sensing amounts of unaerosolized liquid on the aerosol generator. Another feature is the 25 potential ability to vaporize or burn off unwanted unaerosolized liquid from the aerosol generator. The requisite heat may be applied by an electrical resistance heater, or the like.

In one embodiment, the supply of liquid to the aerosol generator is delivered in predetermined quantities. Each predetermined quantity may be a fraction of a total dose, and thus each delivery of the predetermined delivery may be counted. When the number of 25 deliveries matches the quantity of the total dose, the liquid supply is interrupted.

Referring now to Figure 1, one embodiment of an aerosolization device 10 will be described. Device 10 comprises a housing 12 to hold the various components of aerosolization device 10. Housing 12 further includes a mouthpiece 14 and one or more vents (not shown) to permit air to enter into housing 12 when a user inhales from mouthpiece 30 14. Disposed within housing 12 is an aerosol generator 16 that comprises a cup-shaped member 18 to which is coupled an aperture plate 20. An annular piezoelectric element 22 is in contact with aperture plate 20 to cause aperture plate 20 to vibrate when electrical current

is supplied to piezoelectric element 22. Aperture plate 20 is dome-shaped in geometry and includes a plurality of tapered apertures that narrow from the rear surface to the front surface. Exemplary aperture plates and aerosol generators that may be used in aerosolization device 10 are described in U.S. Patent Nos. 5,086,785, 5,157,372 and 5,309,135, incorporated herein by reference.

Aerosolization device 10 further includes a liquid feed system 24 having a supply of liquid that is to be aerosolized by aerosol generator 16. Liquid feed system 24 may be configured to place metered amounts of liquid onto aperture plate 20. Although not shown, a button or the like may be employed to dispense the liquid when requested by the user. Conveniently, feed system 24 may be configured to supply a unit dose of liquid over time to aperture plate 20. As described hereinafter, a variety of sensors may be used to monitor and control the amount of liquid supplied to aperture plate 20 so that the amount of unaerosolized liquid remains within a certain range.

Housing 12 includes an electronics region 26 for holding the various electrical components of aerosolization device 10. For example, region 26 may include a printed circuit board 28 which serves as a controller to control operation of the aerosol generator 16. More specifically, circuit board 28 may send (via circuitry not shown) an electrical signal to piezoelectric element 22 to cause aperture plate 20 to be vibrated. A power supply P, such as one or more batteries, is electrically coupled to circuit board 28 to provide aerosolization device 10 with power. Optionally, a flow sensor may be used to sense patient inhalation and to operate aerosol generator 16 only when a threshold flow rate has been produced by the user. One example of such a flow sensor is described in copending U.S. Patent Application No. 09/149,246, filed September 8, 1998, the complete disclosure of which is herein incorporated by reference.

25 Figure 2 illustrates schematically an alternative aerosol generator 30 with one fluid supply system according to an embodiment of the invention. The fluid supply system is configured to maintain a proper supply of liquid to aerosol generator 30. Although described in connection with aerosol generator 30, it will be appreciated that the system of Figure 2 may be used with any of the aerosolization devices described herein.

30 The aerosol generator 30 is in the form of a cantilevered beam 32 on which a piezoelectric oscillator 38 is mounted. The free end 37 of the beam 32 is provided with a planar surface through which there are microscopic tapered apertures. Fluid 42 in contact

with the free end 37 is ejected through the tapered apertures producing droplets 44 when the beam is oscillated at high frequency by the piezoelectric oscillator 38. The fluid supply system 50 continuously transports fluid 51 to wet the oscillating surface 37 via a supply tube 53 ending at a supply nozzle 54. The fluid 51 is transported to the surface 37 at a rate which 5 is lower than the maximum ejection rate of the apertures 40 to prevent overflow of fluid 42 from the supply side of the oscillating surface 37. A pinch valve 56 controls delivery of the fluid 51 to the oscillating surface 37. The fluid supply system 50 is connected to an electronic flow control valve 52 which is connected to an electronic circuit that detects the amount of liquid 42 on the oscillating surface 37. In the event of excessive delivery of fluid, 10 the oscillation amplitude decreases and the current draw by the piezoelectric element 38 decreases. This is because as the load changes, there is a corresponding change in the impedance of the piezoelectric element. A current sensor circuit 39 senses the current draw and transmits an overflow signal 41 to the flow control valve 52 to reduce the delivery rate of the liquid 51 to the surface 37 until the amount of fluid returns to normal level.

15 The arrangement described in Figure 2 utilizes an electrical characteristic (e.g. impedance) of the piezoelectric element 38 which is dependent upon the liquid load on aerosol generator 30. By sensing the electrical characteristic, either in absolute or relative terms, it is possible to control the rate of liquid supply to the aerosol generator in order to maintain the amount of unaerosolized liquid adhering to the beam 32 within certain limits. In 20 other words, if the amount of unaerosolized liquid on the beam 32 falls below a lower limit, the flow rate may be increased to prevent the aerosol generator from running dry. On the other hand, if the amount of unaerosolized liquid on the beam 32 rises above an upper limit, the flow rate may be decreased or even temporarily suspended to prevent overloading of the aerosol generator. As previously mentioned, such a system may also be used with aerosol 25 generator 16 of Figure 1 by sensing the amount drawn by piezoelectric element 22.

Figure 3 schematically illustrates a conductive sensor 70 that may be used to sense the volume of fluid on an aperture plate, including any of those described herein. For convenience of discussion, sensor 70 is described with reference to aerosol generator 18 of Figure 1. Conductive sensor 70 is used to measure electrical conductivity between two points 30 72,74 above a surface of aperture plate 20 to which unaerosolized liquid adheres. One of the points 72 is located adjacent where liquid is delivered to the aerosol generator, while the other point 74 is spaced laterally of where such liquid is delivered. In use, a build-up of

unaerosolized liquid on aperture plate 20 will have no appreciable effect on electrical conductivity measured by a detector 76, until the unaerosolized liquid bridges the spacing between point 72,74. When the detector 76 registers a sudden change in conductivity - indicative of current flowing through unaerosolized liquid - the flow rate of liquid supply 5 may be reduced to avoid further build-up of liquid. A second conductive sensor (not shown) may be positioned to detect when the amount of unaerosolized liquid falls below a lower level, for triggering an increase in liquid flow when required. In this way, conductivity may be used to maintain the amount of unaerosolized liquid supplied to the aerosol generator within certain limits.

10 In another embodiment, the conductive sensor 70 may be replaced with an optical sensor which, for example, senses the present or absence of unaerosolized liquid in a certain location, or series of discrete locations on the aperture plate. If the presence of unaerosolized liquid is sensed at an outer location spaced from the point of liquid delivery to the aerosol generator, the flow rate of liquid supply may be reduced. If the absence of 15 unaerosolized liquid is sensed in another location spaced inwardly from the outer location, the flow rate of liquid supply may be increased.

Figure 4 schematically illustrates in more detail liquid feed system 24 of Figure 1. Liquid feed system 24 includes a canister 100 configured to deliver liquid to aperture plate 20 of aerosol generator 16. A sensor 102 (be it piezo, conductive or optical) 20 senses the unaerosolized liquid adhering to the aperture plate 20, and relays this information to controller 104. Controller 104 controls a dispensing system 106 which, upon receipt of dispensed signal from controller 104, dispenses a predetermined amount of liquid (e.g. 5 microliters) from canister 100. Dispensing system 106 comprises a motor 108 which drives a lead screw 110 coupled to a piston 112 associated with canister 100. When the controller 104 25 senses via sensor 102 that the amount of unaerosolized liquid on the aperture plate 20 has fallen below a lower limit, it activates motor 108 for a predetermined time, e.g. one second. In this time, motor 108 turns lead screw 110 causing piston 112 to advance a predetermined amount and hence deliver a measured quantity of liquid to the aerosol generator.

A meter 114 is coupled to the motor 108 and to the piezoelectric transducer 30 22. The meter 114 counts the number of times the motor 108 is activated in any period of continuous operation of the aerosol generator, i.e., while piezoelectric transducer 22 is vibrating. The meter 114 serves to prevent the motor 108 from being operated more than a

predetermined number of times (e.g., 20) in any one period of use. In this way, the user may continue to use the aerosol generator 16 until an appropriate dose has been aerosolized (e.g., 20 x 5 microliters = 100 microliters). At this time, operation of the motor 108 is temporarily stopped by the meter 114 and a corresponding signal sent to controller 104. Such a signal 5 may enable an indication to be given to the user that a full dose has been delivered.

In some cases, the user may stop operation without aerosolizing the full dose. The controller may be configured to record the partial dosage and notify the user when attempting to continue operation.

Figure 5 schematically illustrates a heater 120 for an aerosol generator, such as 10 aerosol generator 16 of Figure 1. Heater 120 is useful when unaerosolized liquid remains on the aperture plate 20 after the supply of liquid has ceased, e.g., because required dose has been delivered or the user stops operation. Heater 120 is incorporated into the aerosol generator 16 in order to vaporize or burn off excess unaerosolized liquid on the aperture plate 20. Heater 120 is an annular electrical resistance heater, and is energized by power source P 15 under control of controller 104. In use, sensor 102 relays information to the controller 104 that unaerosolized liquid remains on the aperture plate 20 after the supply of liquid through supply system 100 has ceased. If this situation remains unchanged for a predetermined time interval, the controller 104 may activate switch 122 to heat aperture plate 20 by heater 120. In this way, excess unaerosolized liquid may be removed, ensuring the aperture plate 20 is 20 clear and ready for reuse.

Referring now to figure 6, one method of controlling the supply of liquid to an aerosolizing device will now be described. The process begins at step 200 where an aerosol generator is provided. Liquid is supplied at step 202 to the aerosol generator for aerosolization. Some of the liquid supplied is unaerosolized and accumulates on the aerosol 25 generator, and the amount of such liquid is sensed as shown at step 204. The amount of liquid sensed is then compared at step 206 with a predetermined range of amounts, the upper limit of which corresponds to the maximum desired amount on the aerosol generator, and the lower limit of which corresponds to the minimum desired amount on the aerosol generator. If the sensed amount exceeds the upper limit, the flow rate is decreased at step 208, and if the 30 sensed amount falls below the lower limit, the flow rate is increased as shown at step 210. The total amount of liquid supplied to the aerosol generator is monitored at step 212. If the total amount is less than a predetermined total dose, the supply cycle is repeated, and if the

total amount is equal to the predetermined dose, the supply is terminated at step 218. Any unaerosolized liquid on the aerosol generator after terminating the supply is burnt off at 220 by energizing an electric heater.

The invention has now been described in detail for purposes of clarity of
5 understanding. However, it will be appreciated that certain changes and modifications may
be practiced within the scope of the appended claims.

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

- 1 1. An aerosolization device comprising:
2 a liquid supply system that is adapted to hold a supply of liquid;
3 an aerosol generator configured to aerosolize liquid supplied from the liquid
4 supply system;
5 a sensor that is configured to sense an amount of unaerosolized liquid supplied
6 to the aerosol generator; and
7 a controller to control operation of the liquid supply system based on
8 information received from the sensor.

- 1 2. An aerosolization device according to claim 1, wherein the aerosol
2 generator comprises a vibratable element and an aperture plate.

- 1 3. An aerosolization device according to claim 2, wherein the aperture
2 plate includes a plurality of tapered apertures.

- 1 4. An aerosolization device according to claim 1, wherein the controller
2 is configured to maintain the amount of supplied and unaerosolized liquid within a certain
3 range during aerosolization.

- 1 5. An aerosolization device according to claim 1, wherein the sensor
2 comprises a strain gauge coupled to the aerosol generator for detecting variations in strain
3 according to variations in the amount of unaerosolized liquid in contact with the aerosol
4 generator.

- 1 6. An aerosolization device according to claim 5, wherein the strain
2 gauge comprises a piezoelectric element, with variations in the amount of unaerosolized
3 liquid adhered to the aerosol generator causing corresponding variations in an electrical
4 characteristic of the piezoelectric element.

- 1 7. An aerosolization device according to claim 6, further comprising
2 electrical circuitry configured to measure variations in impedance of the piezoelectric
3 element.

1 8. An aerosolization device according to claim 6, wherein the
2 piezoelectric element is disposed to vibrate an aperture plate in the aerosol generator.

1 9. An aerosolization device according to claim 1, wherein the sensor
2 comprises an optical sensor.

1 10. An aerosolization device according to claim 9, wherein the optical
2 sensor is configured to sense the presence or absence of supplied and unaerosolized liquid in
3 a certain location on the aerosol generator.

1 11. An aerosolization device according to claim 10, wherein the certain
2 location is spaced from where liquid is supplied to the aerosol generator.

1 12. An aerosolization device according to claim 1, wherein the sensor
2 comprises a conductive sensor configured to sense electrical conductivity between at least
3 two points across a surface of the aerosol generator on which supplied and unaerosolized
4 liquid adheres, at least one point being spaced from where liquid is supplied to the aerosol
5 generator.

1 13. An aerosolization device according to claim 12, wherein one of the at
2 least two points is closer to where liquid is supplied to the aerosol generator than another of
3 the at least two points.

1 14. An aerosolization device according to claim 1, wherein the amount of
2 unaerosolized liquid supplied to the aerosol generator remains within the range from about 2
3 to about 20 μ l (microliters).

1 15. An aerosolization device according to claim 1, further comprising a
2 housing having a mouthpiece, the aerosol generator being disposed in the housing for
3 delivery of aerosolized liquid through the mouthpiece.

1 16. An aerosolization device according to claim 1, wherein the liquid
2 supply system comprises a dispenser for dispensing a certain amount of liquid upon receipt of
3 a dispense signal from the controller.

1 17. An aerosolization device according to claim 16, further comprising a
2 meter for limiting the number of times the dispenser is activated during operation of the
3 aerosol generator.

1 18. An aerosolization device according to claim 1, further comprising a
2 heater for heating unaerosolized liquid supplied to the aerosol generator.

1 19. An aerosolization device according to claim 18, wherein the heater is
2 configured to heat the aerosol generator to vaporize the unaerosolized liquid.

1 20. An aerosolization device according to claim 19, wherein the heater
2 comprises an electrical resistance heating element and an electrical power supply for
3 energizing resistance heating.

1 21. An aerosolization device comprising:
2 a liquid supply system that is adapted to hold a supply of liquid;
3 an aerosol generator comprising an element having a plurality of apertures and
4 an electrical transducer disposed to vibrate the element when energized;
5 a sensor configured to sense an electrical characteristic of the electrical
6 transducer that is dependent upon an amount of unaerosolized liquid adhering to the element;
7 and
8 a controller to control operation of the liquid supply system based on the
9 electrical characteristic sensed by the sensor, whereby the amount of unaerosolized liquid
10 adhering to the element is maintained within a certain range during aerosolization.

1 22. An aerosolization device according to claim 21, wherein the electrical
2 transducer comprises a piezoelectric element.

1 23. An aerosolization device according to claim 22, wherein the electrical
2 characteristic sensed by the sensor is the impedance of the piezoelectric element.

1 24. An aerosolization device according to claim 21, wherein the controller
2 is configured to maintain the amount of unaerosolized liquid adhering to the element within a
3 range of from about 2 to about 20 μ l (microliters) during aerosolization.

1 25. An aerosolization device according to claim 21, further comprising a
2 housing having a mouthpiece, the aerosol generator being disposed in the housing for
3 delivery of aerosolized liquid through the mouthpiece.

1 26. An aerosolization device according to claim 21, wherein the liquid
2 supply system comprises a dispenser for dispensing a certain amount of liquid upon receipt of
3 a dispense signal from the controller.

1 27. An aerosolization device according to claim 26, further comprising a
2 meter for limiting the number of times the dispenser dispenses the amount of liquid during
3 operation of the aerosol generator.

1 28. An aerosolization device according to claim 21, further comprising a
2 heater for heating unaerosolized liquid supplied to the aerosol generator.

1 29. An aerosolization device according to claim 28, wherein the heater is
2 adapted to heat the aerosol generator to vaporize the unaerosolized liquid applied to the
3 aerosol generator.

1 30. An aerosolization device according to claim 28, wherein the heater
2 comprises an electrical resistance heating element and an electrical power supply for
3 energizing resistance heating.

1 31. A method of aerosolizing a liquid, the method comprising:
2 providing an aerosol generator that is operable to aerosolize a liquid;
3 supplying a liquid to the aerosol generator from a liquid supply system at a
4 certain flow rate;
5 operating the aerosol generator to aerosolize at least some of the supplied
6 liquid;
7 sensing an amount of the supplied liquid that remains unaerosolized; and
8 regulating rate of liquid supply based on the sensed amount of unaerosolized
9 liquid.

1 32. A method according to claim 31, wherein the rate of liquid supply is
2 decreased when the sensed amount of unaerosolized liquid exceeds a certain value.

1 33. A method according to claim 31, wherein the rate of liquid supply is
2 increased when the sensed amount of unaerosolized liquid falls below a certain value.

1 34. A method according to claim 31, wherein the aerosol generator
2 comprises a plate having a plurality of apertures and a vibratable element disposed to vibrate
3 the plate.

1 35. A method according to claim 31, wherein the step of sensing
2 comprises:

3 providing a sensor comprising a piezoelectric element coupled to the aerosol
4 generator such that variations in the amount of unaerosolized liquid adhered to the aerosol
5 generator cause corresponding variations in electrical characteristics of the piezoelectric
6 element; and

7 measuring an electrical characteristic of the piezoelectric element.

1 36. A method according to claim 35, wherein the electrical characteristic
2 measured is selected from a group consisting of impedance, capacitance and inductance.

1 37. A method according to claim 31, wherein the step of sensing
2 comprises:

3 providing an optical sensor; and
4 detecting with the optical sensor the presence or absence of unaerosolized
5 liquid in a certain location on the aerosol generator.

1 38. A method according to claim 37, wherein the certain location is spaced
2 from where liquid is supplied to the aerosol generator.

1 39. A method according to claim 31, wherein the step of sensing
2 comprises:

3 providing a conductive sensor configured to sense electrical conductivity
4 between at least two points on a surface of the aerosol generator on which unaerosolized
5 liquid adheres, and measuring electrical conductivity between the at least two points.

1 40. A method according to claim 31, further comprising:
2 maintaining the rate of liquid supply such that the unaerosolized liquid
3 remains within a certain range during operation of the aerosol generator.

1 41. A method according to claim 40, wherein the certain range maintained
2 is from about 2 to about 20 μ l (microliters).

1 42. A method according to claim 31, further comprising:
2 providing a housing with a mouthpiece, the aerosol generator being disposed
3 in the housing for delivery of aerosolized liquid through the mouthpiece;
4 detecting when a user inhales through the mouthpiece; and
5 operating the aerosol generator upon detection of inhalation through the
6 mouthpiece.

1 43. A method according to claim 31, wherein the supply step comprises
2 dispensing a certain amount of liquid from the liquid supply system for the aerosol generator.

1 44. A method according to claim 43, in which the supply step further
2 comprises metering the number of times the amount of liquid is dispensed during operation of
3 the aerosol generator.

1 45. A method according to claim 31, further comprising:
2 providing a heater for heating unaerosolized liquid supplied to the aerosol
3 generator.

1 46. A method according to claim 45, further comprising sensing whether
2 any of the supplied liquid remains unaerosolized after ceasing the liquid supply; and
3 operating the heater upon sensing such supplied liquid remaining.

1 47. . . A method according to claim 46, wherein the heater vaporizes the
2 remaining unaerosolized liquid.

1 48. A method of controlling supply of a liquid to an aerosol generator,
2 comprising:

3 operating a liquid supply system to supply a liquid to a vibratable aperture
4 element of an aerosol generator;

5 sensing an amount of liquid adhering to the vibratable aperture element; and
6 controlling operation of the liquid supply system to adjust the amount of liquid
7 in contact with the vibratable aperture element.

1 49. A method according to claim 48, further comprising vibrating the
2 vibratable aperture element while operating the liquid supply system to aerosolize liquid
3 supplied to the vibratable aperture element.

1 50. A method according to claim 49, wherein the step of controlling
2 comprises increasing the liquid supply when the sensed amount of liquid adhering to the
3 vibratable aperture element falls below a certain value.

1 51. A method according to claim 49, wherein the step of controlling
2 comprises decreasing the liquid supply when the sensed amount of liquid adhering to the
3 vibratable aperture element rises above a certain value.

1 52. A method according to claim 49, wherein the step of sensing
2 comprises:

3 providing a sensor comprising a piezoelectric element coupled to the
4 vibratable aperture element such that variations in the amount of unaerosolized liquid adhered
5 to the vibratable aperture element cause corresponding variations in electrical characteristics
6 of the piezoelectric element; and

7 measuring an electrical characteristic of the piezoelectric element.

1 53. A method according to claim 52, wherein the electrical characteristic
2 measured is selected from a group consisting of impedance, capacitance and inductance.

1 54. A method according to claim 49, wherein the step of sensing
2 comprises:

3 providing an optical sensor; and
4 detecting with the optical sensor the presence or absence of unaerosolized
5 liquid in a certain location on the vibratable aperture element.

1 55. A method according to claim 54, wherein the certain location is spaced
2 from where liquid is supplied to the vibratable aperture element.

1 56. A method according to claim 55, wherein the step of sensing
2 comprises:

3 providing a conductive sensor configured to sense electrical conductivity
4 between at least two points on a surface of the vibratable aperture element on which
5 unaerosolized liquid adheres, and measuring electrical conductivity between the at least two
6 points.

1 57. A method according to claim 49, further comprising:
2 providing a housing with a mouthpiece, the aerosol generator being disposed
3 in the housing for delivery of aerosolized liquid through the mouthpiece;
4 detecting when a user inhales through the mouthpiece; and
5 operating the aerosol generator upon detection of inhalation through the
6 mouthpiece.

1 58. A method according to claim 49, wherein the liquid supply system
2 operation step comprises dispensing a certain amount of liquid from the liquid supply system
3 for the aerosol generator.

1 59. A method according to claim 58, wherein the liquid supply system
2 operation step further comprises metering the number of times the amount of liquid is
3 dispensed during operation of the aerosol generator.

1 60. A method according to claim 49, further comprising:
2 providing a heater for heating unaerosolized liquid supplied to the aerosol
3 generator.

1 61. A method according to claim 60, further comprising:

- 2 sensing whether any of the supplied liquid remains unaerosolized after ceasing
- 3 the liquid supply; and
- 4 operating the heater upon sensing of the remaining liquid.

116

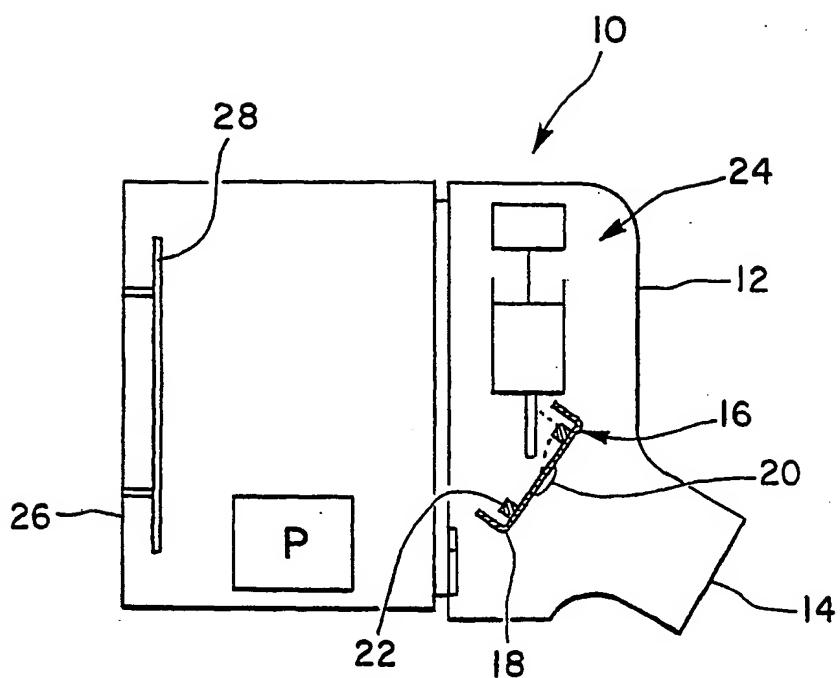


Fig. 1

216

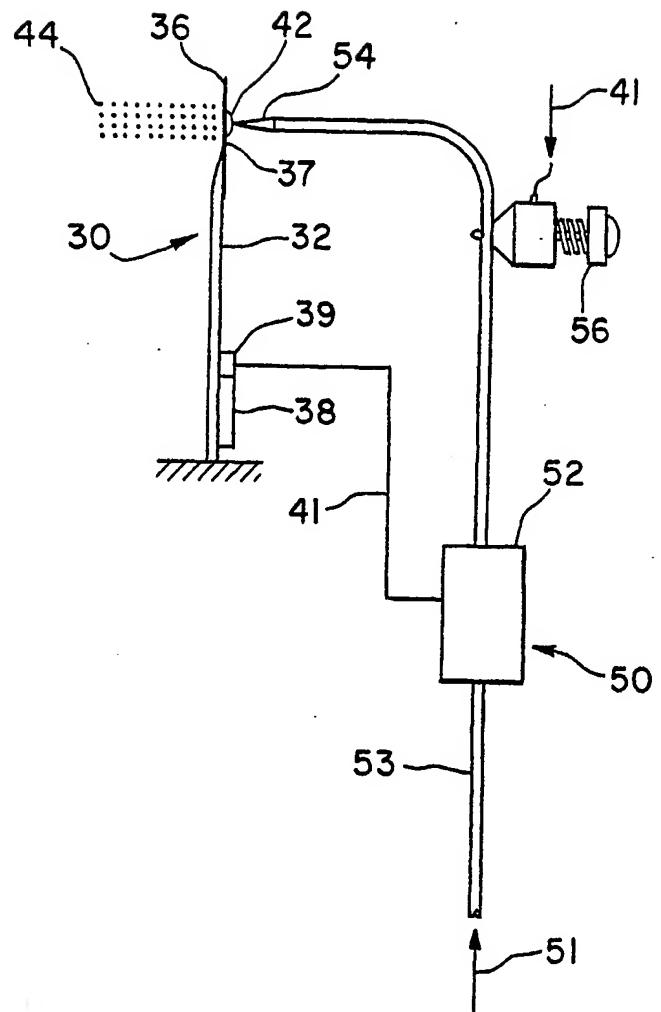


Fig. 2

3/6

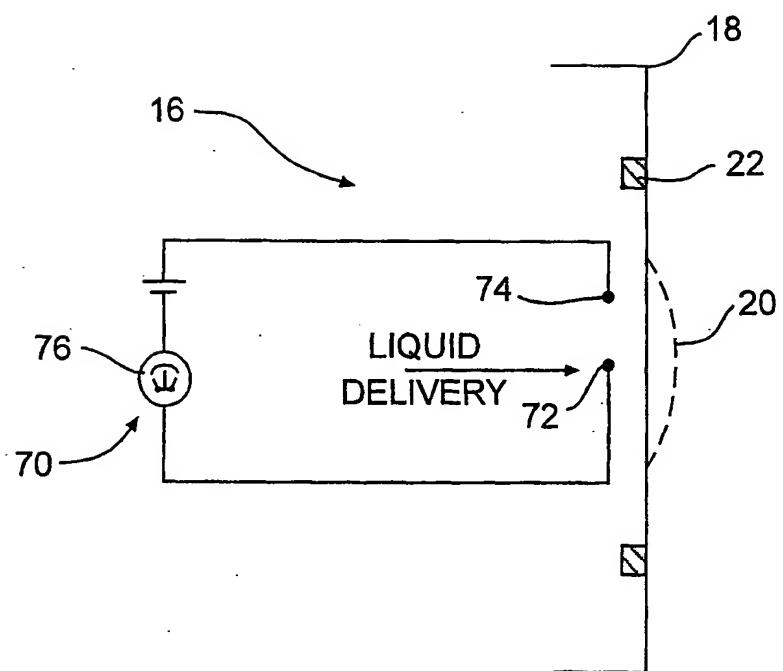


Fig. 3

4/6

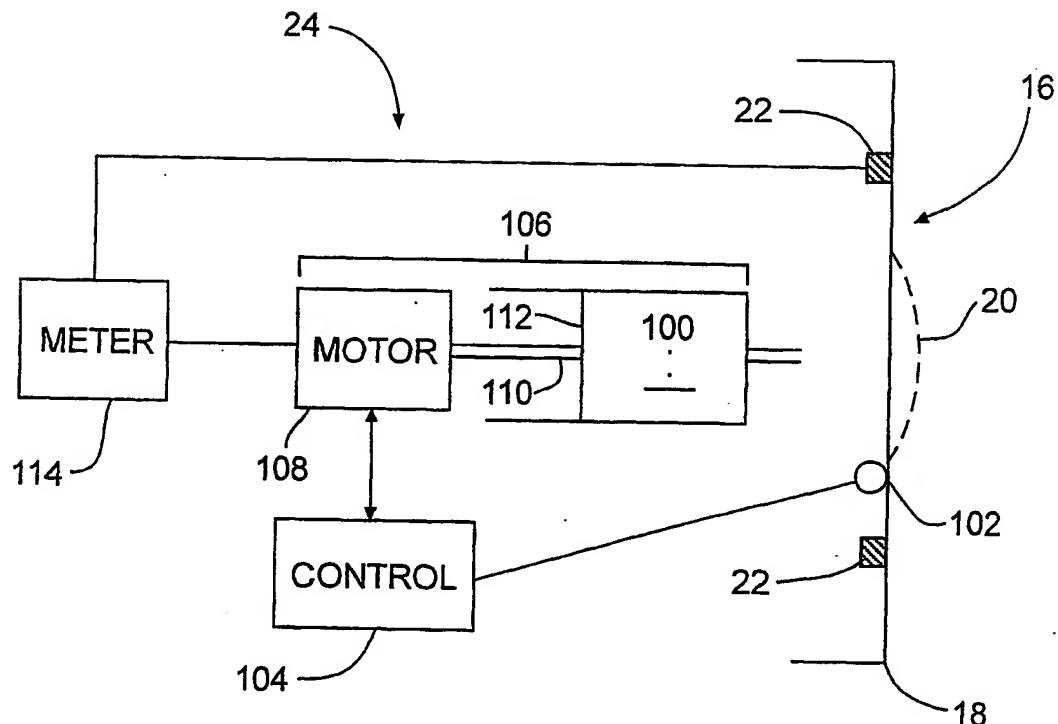


Fig. 4

5/6

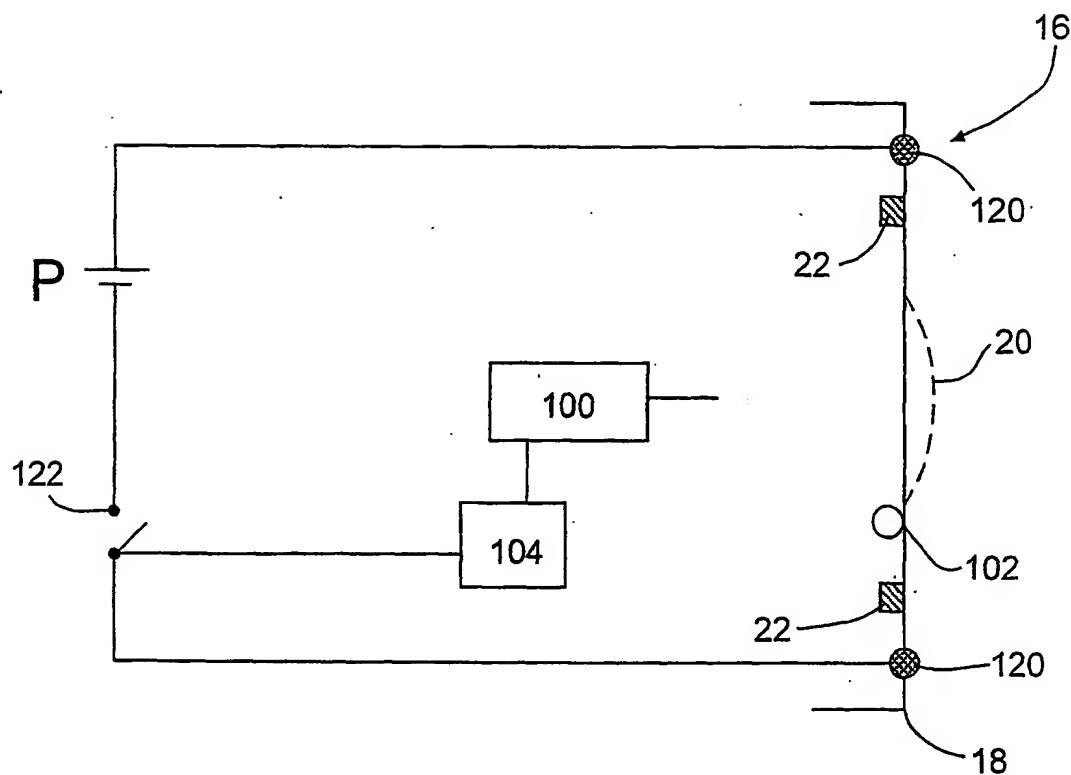


Fig. 5

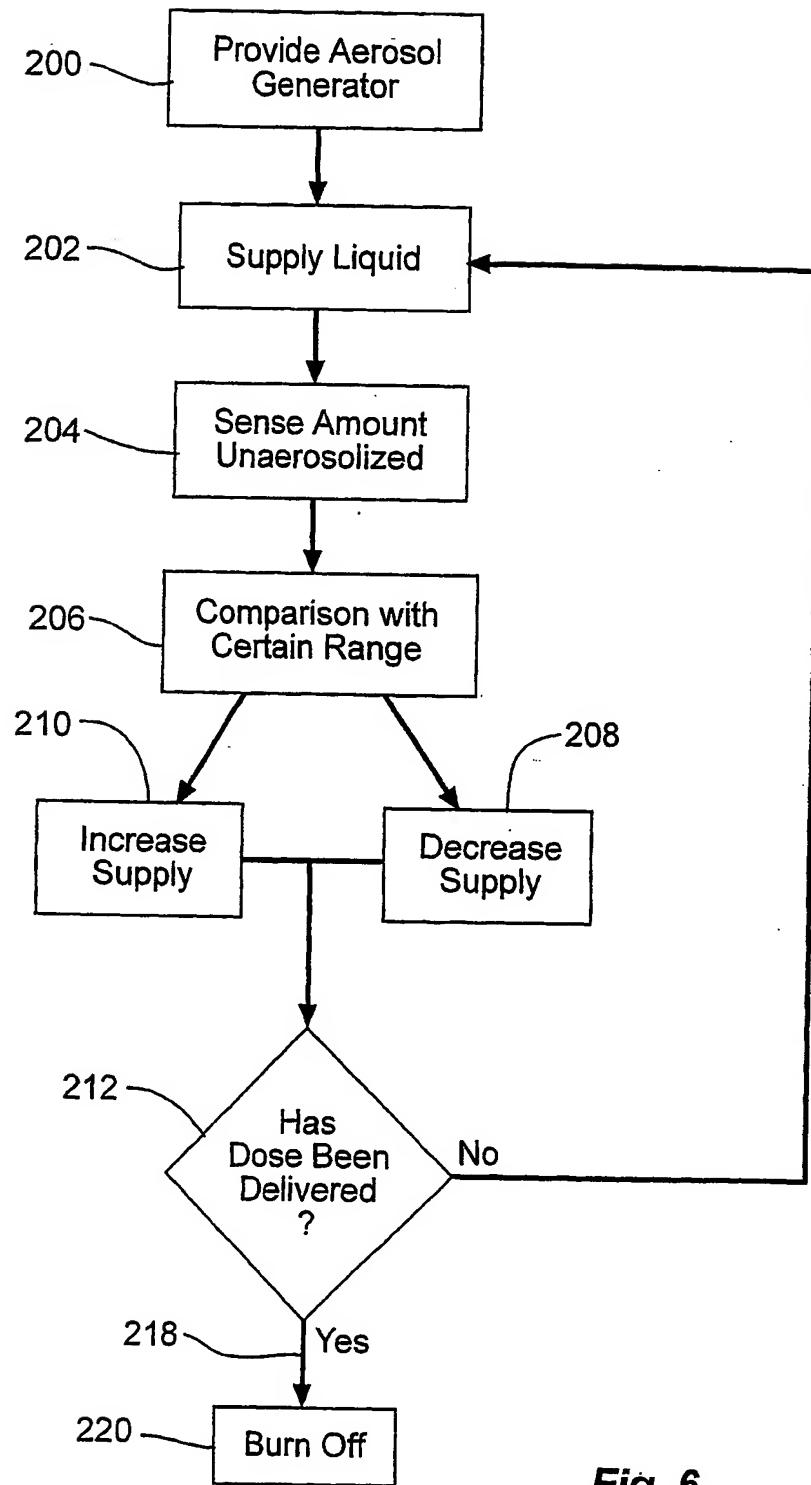


Fig. 6

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.
PCT/US01/30847

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER

IPC(7) :B05B 1/08
US CL :289/102.2; 128/200.16

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)

U.S. : 289/102.2; 128/200.16

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practicable, search terms used)

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
X	WO 99/17888 (TERADA et al.) 15 April 1999, see entire document.	1-16, 21-26, 31-43, 48-58
A	US 4,702,418 A (CARTER et al.) 27 October 1987.	1-61
A	US 5,487,378 A (ROBERTSON et al.) 30 January 1996.	1-61

Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C. See patent family annex.

Special categories of cited documents:		
"A"	document defining the general state of the art which is not considered to be of particular relevance	"T" later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention
"E"	earlier document published on or after the international filing date	"X" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered novel or cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is taken alone
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"O"	document referring to an oral disclosure, use, exhibition or other means	"a" document member of the same patent family
"P"	document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed	

Date of the actual completion of the international search	Date of mailing of the international search report
11 DECEMBER 2001	03 JAN 2002
Name and mailing address of the ISA/US Commissioner of Patents and Trademarks Box PCT Washington, D.C. 20231 Facsimile No. (703) 305-3230	Authorized officer <i>J. Hurley for</i> LESLEY D MORRIS Telephone No. (703) 308-0629

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